Christian Martyrs under Islam : Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World

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Christian C. Sahner, **Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World,** Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018, 335 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-17910-0

It is rare to read a volume of academic research whose title would correspond so precisely to its contents, but this is undoubtedly true of *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World.* The author explains in his "Preface" that when he started his research in 2011 he noticed similarities between the rise of Islamic State (aka Daesh) in Syria and Iraq and certain aspects of his research into the medieval world: "mass enslavement, burdensome taxes, forced conversions, crucifixions, and still worse." (p. xi). The resulting study reviewed here is concerned with how violence was used to configure relations between the early Muslims and their non-Muslim subjects. More specifically, it is a synthetic historical analysis of Christian martyrdom during the three centuries following the Arab conquest.

The "Introduction" is succeeded by five chapters, the first two of which deal with conversion. The difference in focus between the two chapters is their starting-point: the first chapter is about Christians converting to Islam and then returning to Christianity; the second chapter concerns Muslims converting to Christianity. The third chapter focuses on the act of blaspheming against Islam; the fourth describes and discusses "Trying and Killing Christian Martyrs", while the fifth is entitled "Creating Saints and Communities". The concluding chapter of the volume then reflects on the place and use of violence in the making of the Muslim world. Two appendices – one comparing Christian and Muslim accounts of martyrdom, the other a glossary of names and key words – help readers to grasp the details. The bibliography is extensive and thoroughly up to date.

Martyrdom as such has always been present in Christianity. Jesus and all but one of his closest followers, the twelve apostles, were killed violently, witnessing to their faith. According to the author, there were some 270 Christian martyrs in the early Islamic period, as he discovered while looking for traces of them in hagiographies, liturgical calendars, and chronicles. The sources reveal how religious change took many forms in the Middle East in early medieval times. Christian martyrs were clearly outliers. The great majority of converts regarded Islam as a religion that had plenty of room for manoeuvre within its general body, but once they were inside there was no checking out.

After the rise of Islam in the seventh century there appeared three main types of Christian martyr. The first were those Christians who had converted to Islam but then returned to Christianity, paying for the return with their lives. Apostasy was regarded by Muslims as a capital offence, and hence they were executed if found guilty. They could have been Christians who had converted to Islam as slaves or prisoners or Christians brought up in Muslim-Christian families. This group of martyrs is statistically the most numerous.

The second group consisted of Muslims who converted to Christianity with no prior adherence to it. This was a small but significant group in the sense that they showed that religious change after the Arab conquest did not move solely in one direction. In relation to this group the author discusses (pp. 84–92) the conversion to Christianity of Anthony al-Qurashī, who was an alleged member of Muhammad's tribe. Anthony was beheaded in Raqqa in 799, and he has become probably the most famous martyr of the early Islamic period.

The third group consisted of Christians who defamed Muhammad, and frequently in the presence of a high-ranking Muslim official. The group also included Christians who were executed for refusing to submit to compulsory conversion, or who died simply as a result of random, senseless, and non-religious violence. It seems that prohibitions against blasphemy were very slow to form a coherent entity in the classical period of Islam, and blasphemy cases reveal gradations of severity. Even if

blasphemy against the Prophet was considered the most serious offence, even more serious than blasphemy against God, it took Muslim jurists almost seven hundred years to systematize and categorize blasphemy itself. Peter of Capitolias (pp. 130–140), whose biography remained largely inaccessible until recently, may be the best example in this group. Vilifying Islam, he refused to recant before the caliph al-Walīd in 715, and as punishment he first had his tongue removed, and then he was crucified in Capitolias.

The third group also includes the forty-eight Christians who were martyred in and around Córdoba, the capital of al-Andalus, between 850 and 859 (pp. 140–159). It seems that in al-Andalus blasphemy was a specifically Christian form of protest against Islamization and Arabization, including the increasing adoption of the Arabic language. This occurred during a period when the number of Muslim religious scholars was increasing in al-Andalus and when the debate between Christians and Muslims was intensifying. When the differences between the two faiths had become more obvious, this encouraged Christians to confront Muslims more effectively. Most martyrs in Córdoba were killed for blasphemy, not for apostasy. "As Christians searched for a way to express their alienation from this culture, which was descending on them with sudden force in the mid-ninth century, they turned to blasphemy to protest and to draw a clear line around the church in an increasingly mixed-up world." (p. 159). An interesting observation is that in comparison with the situation of Christians in the east, there was also an absence of blasphemy trials in that part of the world. Many Christians in the east shared the Arab culture of the Muslims and may not have been as culturally alienated as Christians in al-Andalus, who found themselves in a culturally and religiously desperate situation.

The Muslim use of violence against Christian renegades seems to have served two purposes. Firstly, it guaranteed and demonstrated the Islamic power and character of the ruling regime. One of the key reasons for the use of violence by Muslims was the demographic situation in the vast areas that they had conquered. Muslims were simply a demographic minority in many of these areas, and remained so for many centuries after the conquest. The second purpose of the use of violence was to put an end to porous relations and to forge boundaries between Muslims and Christians at a moment in history when there was an exceptional mixing of populations. The violence ended the period of porous relations and mixing of populations, but it also established long-lasting antagonism between Christians and Muslims.

This book is a real achievement. It is a fascinating reading experience for any scholar of Christian-Muslim relations, since it deals with a sensitive topic analytically and in an academically balanced manner. The research that it contains shows how religion and religious affiliations are always connected within a cultural, linguistic, economic and larger societal framework; a synthetic approach that is often neglected in the more polarizing media, and sometimes also in the academic world (*pace* atomism). In addition, although the author declares that he had no intension of connecting the past and the present, the book opens up a larger window of understanding for any reader who is interested in current events in the Middle East.

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